DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 454 CS 212 897

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TITLE Infusing a Global Perspective into Business Communication Courses: From Rhetorical Strategies to Cultural Awareness.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Analysis; *Business Communication; College Curriculum; Comparative Analysis; Course Content; Course Descriptions; *Course Organization; *Cross Cultural Training; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Context; *Global Approach; Higher Education; Models
IDENTIFIERS Communication Strategies; *Global Perspectives in Education

ABSTRACT

An infusion model for bringing a global perspective to business communication courses allows traditional course objectives to be met while presenting international material. In the typical 15-week term, the module begins with a four-week look at the traditional rhetorical patterns employed in business communication in the United States. It then moves into a four-week block of rhetorical strategies common to business communication (positive, negative, and persuasive letter and memo writing) in some sample countries. In this manner the business communication international module works back from the surface organization of letters to the cultural assumptions underlying the letters. The formulas for presenting positive, negative, persuasive and mixed information are then seen as relative to audiences themselves, not as rules that must be followed but as guidelines that must be constantly questioned for applicability within a certain discourse community. The following three weeks are devoted to the formal report, in which students target a cultural group or national group and study aspects of the culture and how they affect business. Finally, in a three-week block, students present the information they have gathered to the class. The international material and assignments are thus presented with the traditional United States material and assignments rather than in isolation. (PRA)

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INTRODUCTION

Each day we are reminded that "the future isn't what it used to be." In the business world, dramatic changes are taking place, especially with regard to information processing with the development of sophisticated computers, fax machines, electronic message systems and other information systems. Along with the stunning evolution in technologies has come increased international trade, joint ventures, partnerships, as what were once third world nations move into industry and as the former industrial powers move toward the information age. Businesses are operating on a global scale as never before. From the Minnesota sheepherder who sells byproducts to eastern Europe, has wool processed in Asia and then returned; to the businesses that collect data records in Dayton and send them to the Phillipines to be stored electronically; to the Midwestern U.S. autoworkers who now labor for Japanese companies-- people at all levels of the professions are finding themselves interacting with others from a variety of nations and cultures (see Hamilton). From all predictions for the future, this trend will continue and grow.

The lack of preparedness of American business to interact with other cultures has already caused problems and cost money. Language barriers are really not the issue, though support for greater foreign language skills is the goal of many businesses as they relate to education. A greater problem lies in the lack of understanding of other cultural nuances. A *Detroit News* study found that most problems occuring in Japanese controlled businesses with American managers stemmed from cultural differences; and more than 300,000 Americans work for Japanese companies in the United States alone (Pepper 1A).

The challenge faces us as educators to prepare students for a global future in the world of business. As Retha H. Kilpatrick has noted, "Educational training for international business is needed by a wide variety of people who work in various capacities in different types of firms. This includes those persons who are in charge of business correspondence because to a large degree international business depends on communication. The need to provide international communication training is evidenced by the number of textbook chapters and articles on the subject that have appeared in professional publications in the past two or three years (33)." M. Gerald Lathan states, "As a minimum, business courses should attempt to raise the awareness level of students for differences in priniples and practices of international communication"(18).

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In our business communication courses we are expected to cover everything from language theory to how to get a job. Adding another area of subject matter to already crowded syllabi threatens to overwhelm not only the students but their instructors as well. Still, the reaction of most publishers of business communication texts has been to add a section dealing with international and multicultural business. Pedigogically, we can assume this would be taught as a unit, in isolation or, more likely in view of the realities of a fifteen-week semester, skipped and not taught at all. Part of that reaction stems from the broad scope of global education. As Wendell Berry has written

the word planetary ... refers to an abstract anxiety or an abstract passion that is desperate and useless exactly to the extent that it is abstract...The description of a problem as planetary arouses a motivation for which, of necessity, there is no employment. The adjective "planetary" describes a problem in such a way that it cannot be solved. In fact, though we now have serious problems everywhere on the planet, we have no problem that can accurately be described as planetary... The problems, if we describe them accurately, are all private and small. Or they are so initially. (197)

The problem of separating an international unit in business communication courses is that the scope is too broad to be of use.

Teaching a unit on international communication in isolation leads to a trivialization of the cultures discussed. The limited presentation of international material in textbooks cannot help but lead to a sketchy understanding of world peoples. The whole of China or Japan becomes a paragraph. Billions of people living in a nation become one person who "likes to make people happy and shows deference to those of higher status" (Mexico) ; " stand(s) and sit(s) closer together than we do" (Saudi Arabia); "Who will do everything possible to avoid saying something negative" (Japan) . Because we are short on time and our texts are short on space, we engage in the very stereotyping we deplore when teaching students to analyze audiences. And even if we are careful to point out that these are simply tendencies of other cultures, we still are reinforcing the development of a world view based on stereotype and generalization.

Infusing international material into the business communication course allows the development of students' abilities in dealing with international and multicultural audiences while keeping intact the general topics of the course. "It also avoids ghettoization of international phenomena, as results, for example, from requiring all students to take a single 'third world' culture course" (Schechter 15). By infusing international material beginning with the rhetorical patterns themselves and moving from them into a detailed audience analysis, stereotyping can be consciously avoided. Infusion has been recommended in those courses that don't easily lend themselves to being internationalized--business communication, as it is typically organized, certainly falls into that category . The infusion of international material in the business communication course allows a beginning for students to engage in further study of nations and cultures or allows students the opportunity to begin to deal with their own ethnocentrism. As business programs prepare students for a future with greater international interaction, the standard

curriculum of business communication courses needs to expand in terms of appropriate business "behaviors" while continuing to address the fundmental skills that allow people to perform efficiently within any business environment.

THE INTERNATIONAL MODULE

Overview

This international module was designed to show students that communication practices in business occur within the larger context of cultural values and social norms. Because of the wide variations of what a culture deems appropriate in terms of language and presentation of information, one standard of correctness cannot be applied to cross-cultural communication. "Some communication situations on the international scale require an understanding of cultural differences in order to accept and act upon the communication involved" (Lathan 16). Business Communication traditionally has been taught using principles that are accepted in the United States as the norm. American business has discovered that when dealing with international parties its system of organizing information can lead to negative results. "An effective American business letter may not be effective in France, Germany, Japan or Mexico" (Varner 55). Business has moved toward preparing correspondence with the view of its audience as the primary determiner of organization. This module begins with the traditional rhetorical patterns employed in business communication in America. It then presents rhetorical strategies common to business communication in some sample countries. After learning differences between American communication standards and those of other countries, students investigate the cultural norms of a country or area to become aware of the underlying values and perceptions that create the surface forms of language and organization of information. Finally, students present the information they have gathered on their specific area to the rest of the students in the class.

Objectives

The objectives of the business communication course begin with the traditional principles of business communication covered by texts. If students want to communicate with anyone else in business, they will need to write efficient memos and letters. To fulfill the requirements of the jobs they will fill, they will need to write effective reports. To work efficiently with colleagues and others, they will need to communicate well orally. These fundamentals of business communication provide the skeletal structure for effective communication with any other person, from one's own culture to one of any other culture. In addition to the conventional objectives of a business communication course, the international module focuses on the students developing skills that lead the attainment of objectives including the following:

increased awareness of the relativity of linguistic "correctness" from one culture or social setting to another

knowledge of the rhetorical pattern of another culture for correspondence of positive information, negative information, and persuasive information

knowledge of the format and diction common to the correspondence of a country unlike that used in the United States

application of the rhetorical pattern and conventional choices of information of another country or culture in correspondence of positive, negative, and persuasive information

investigation of the norms, values, beliefs, and social structure of a single country or culture that affect the presentation of information in business communication and relating the findings in a formal report

presentation of the findings of the formal report by sharing that information to the class in an oral report or presentation of related material unsuitable to the formal report

Assignments

The assignments included in the international module reflect the objectives of the assignments taught in the conventional busness communication course. Students learn positive, negative and persuasive memo and letter writing, but in addition to writing cases based on American audiences and American business problems, students write memos and letters to international audiences, attempting to employ the rhetorical conventions of the audience. Students may write complaint letters to German automakers, persuasive letters to Japanese computer developers; in short, the plethora of writing opportunities available for American correspondence are available on an international scale as well. Though they cannot write to a representative of every culture, students soon become aware that audience analysis involves careful appraisal and few, if any, assumptions. The formal report, including all the traditional objectives, is the platform by which students engage in further audience analysis. The oral report is the channel the students use share results with their peers.

Calendar

The international material and assignments are presented with the traditional United States material and assignments. There is no international "unit" offered in isolation. In the typical fifteen-week term, after four weeks of covering writing review, formats, and principles of business communication, the course moves into positive, negative, and persuasive letter and memo writing. This is a four-week block of the term. International material relating to the development of business correspondence is presented at this time. The following three weeks are devoted to the

formal report. The students' investigation of the social forces that shape communication takes place at this time. Finally, three weeks allow the oral presentations of the formal reports.

Letters and Memos

The infusion of international material begins when students are writing positive, negative, persuasive and mixed letter and memos. We analyze the typical sample correspondence written by Americans. Then we analyze letters written by the Japanese and discuss differences in the surface rhetorical forms (see Haneda and Shima). By beginning with the products of written correspondence we are able to look at the writing of an individual--we have to be very careful about any cultural conclusions we draw. After analyzing a number of international letters, we can make some tentative generalizations, with support from some background sources (see Varner; Haneda and Shima ; Halpern; and Johnston).

The students are then given a number of cases involving domestic and international audiences to whom they are writing. This allows students to experiment with aspects of subject matter and tone they have previously never been called upon to use. When writing a complaint letter to a Japanese printer manufacturer, the students should be careful to follow traditional Japanese rhetorical principles (opening with discussion of the season, commenting on the reader's prosperity, etc) and to understand that cultural dynamics would affect such things as when they should expect a reply. When writing a correspondence with a similar objective to a different audience, they can see the shifts in diction and tone they employ almost automatically.

When analyzing and writing business correspondence to international audiences as well as domestic audiences, students become aware of their ethnocentricity in a remarkable way, as if it comes out of them instead of being told to them by one more enlightened. When they read support material commenting on their national behavior, they can see some of their behaviors and values in a new light. They may think twice about the drive-up window of the fast food restaurant, something very odd and crude to cultures other than our own who perceive Americans as people who are always in a hurry (who would want their dinner thrown out a window in a bag into their car?) (see Obinkaram Echewa). They also then can see the dangers of applying behavioral tendencies to large groups of people, even though those tendencies are generally true (see Raybon and see Nahm for American stereotyping of other cultures or ethnic groups in America).

In this manner the business communication international module works back from the surface organization of letters to the cultural assumptions underlying the letters and at the same time compares and contrasts those tendencies with American tendencies. The formulas for presenting positive, negative, persuasive and mixed information are then seen as relative to audiences themselves, not as rules that must be followed but as guidelines that must be constantly questioned for applicability within a certain discourse community.

The Formal Report

The formal report offers students the opportunity to target a cultural group or national group and to do further study into the aspects of culture and how they affect business. Because an infusion model has been criticized for being "a strategy which maximizes breadth at the expense of depth" (Schechter 15), the formal report can allow students to study an aspect of their earlier subject mattter with a greater degree of focus The students write the report for an American audience (business superior or the like) who needs information in order to do business successfully with an international audience. Students can combine an interest with a certain country or people with other interests as well. Some students have reported on rituals of doing business-- exchanging business cards with a Chinese individual, socializing in Japan when making a business transaction--do's and don'ts such as gift giving, social customs of dining, the relative degree of sexism in one place versus another. Some students investigate just how internationally involved a single company is, and most are stunned to discover the extent to which even small business is dependent on international business once all suppliers and purchasers and others have been traced. By focusing the formal report on an aspect of international business or culture, students can go into far greater depth in this audience analysis than the traditional curriculum would allow.

Still, the conventional objectives of the formal report are focused upon. The students must learn to prepare the various parts of the report, must document information correctly, must design visuals (though with international subject matter, the visual possibilities become very exciting, especially regarding food and clothing). Again, by infusing the global material into each component of the course, the knowledge comes as a by-product of other investigations and occurs much more naturally to the students. Students earn a great degree of specific knowledge of the area they have chosen themselves, and all students earn knowledge of the objectives covering the preparation of formal reports.

The Oral Report

The oral presentation, besides covering the objectives of oral reporting we have traditionally thought important, also has infused an international or global perspective. In this report, most students share with the class orally the results of their formal investigations. However, students are encouraged to present any other aspect of their topic they deem appropriate for oral presentation. This allows objectives to be attained that are beyond the scope of the traditional class, especially in the affective domain. This also takes the cultural audience analysis to the non-verbal level in some cases, which can support divergent learning styles.

For example, students might prepare the food of a people or culture and serve it to the class while explaining its importance. Students may actually demonstrate rituals of dining or of exchanging gifts or business cards. Students might display the clothing of an area or show the dance or play the music of a culture. Through the oral reports, all students are immersed in the global discoveries of the other students in the class. The students presenting do so with a fervency that goes beyond their commitment to the usual oral report because they sense they do, in fact,

have something unique to say. The students listening to the oral presentations get to experience some cultural information through their senses, instead of simply through cognitive analysis, which may not leave a strong impact.

CONCLUSION

An infusion model for bringing a global perspective to business communication courses allows the traditional objectives to be met in the course while at the same time presenting new material for students. It begins with the examination of surface structures and continues to questions of the underlying tendencies of a culture that result in those surface structures--realizing that these questions may have a foundation and may only be the result of an individual's idiosyncrasies. It moves to a comparative analysis and application in which students can become aware of their own ethnocentricity and develop more versatility in their writing style. It requires an in-depth analysis of audience, using the formal report as the vehicle to communicate its findings. It concludes with oral presentation where information is shared in a classroom community, where the affective domain can become part of the objectives attained and where students who are more non-verbal in their learning can experience learning more suited to their strength in presenting and processing information.

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